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Post-Brexit British national identity politics and sport

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1. Nationalism and cultural identity in the UK

It appears that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the UK) has been undergoing political turmoil over the last few years. In 2014 and 2016, the people in this country cast a vote for two historically important issues: Scottish independence and Brexit. With regards to the former, a majority of Scottish voters decided to remain in the union of the Kingdom. In terms of the latter, more than half of British citizens choose to leave the European Union. However, during the election period, so fierce and so emotive were the campaigns for or against these two political changes that it was difficult to expect the result until the very last moment (Grice, 2016). In fact, the outcomes of the two referenda were so close that the series of political incidents almost divided the nation (Hobolt, 2016; Peterkin, 2014). At the core of the two “in or out” votes lie nationalism.

In the UK, nationalism matters. It should be noted that this country is comprised of the four home nations which include England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that each national community displays a distinctive cultural identity. For example, while English operates as a common language in the UK, the home nations except for England maintain its own dialect. Scottish speaks Gaelic alongside English and people in Wales consider Welsh as an official language of the nation. Additionally, Scotland and Northern Ireland also issue different banknotes with their national symbols and heroic figures printed on them. Historically, the relations between England and the three home nations have not always been friendly and cooperative. Before the age of the union, England, arguably being the most powerful, invaded and attempted to conquer the rest of the island, and the three Celtic nations fiercely defended their sovereignty (Strong, 1996). In 1707, they finally became a union of the kingdom, but the legacy of the prolonged political rivalry still affects the national identity politics of the four home nations today (Mackie, 1964). Especially the Celtic fringe nations, owing to the history of English invasion and domination, keep a unique national identity (Hearn, 2000). After Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland established a devolved

government in 1999, they exercise more political and economic autonomy than before. Since then, national identity politics within the UK has become more prevalent.

2. Sport and National Identity in the UK

Sport is arguably the most prominent cultural practice through which the four nations in the UK can demonstrate their national identity (Smith & Porter, 2004). Yet, sport and national identity politics in the UK is more complicated than as it seems. In some cases, each home nation participates in international sporting competitions as a separate entity. The FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Championship are the examples. On other occasions, the Team Great Britain (Team GB) which is basically a sporting union of the four home nations enters sporting contests such as the Olympic Games and the IAAF World Championship. More complicatedly, at the IRB Rugby World Cup, Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK, builds a sporting union with the Republic of Ireland which is a sovereign European state whereas England, Wales, and Scotland take part in the rugby championship separately. In addition, due to unequal power relations between England and the Celtic fringe, there exists a strong sporting rivalry between England and the rest (Gibbons & Malcolm, 2017). An England-Scotland match triggers a particularly fervent sense of nationalistic emotion which reflects the history of invasion and conquest that characterises the Anglo-Scottish relations (Bairner, 2001).

The use of national symbols in sport also mirrors this complexity and rivalry. The official national flag and anthem of the UK are the Union flag and “God Save Queen”. Yet, nationalists in the Celtic fringe feel uncomfortable to see the use of the song and the flag as a symbolic representation of their nations because these symbols predominantly portray English national identity. In this respect, sport offers one of the few occasions wherein Scots, Welsh, and Irish in the UK can display their national symbols freely. For instance, at the international football and rugby fixtures, St Andrew’s flag is raised and “Flower of Scotland” is played for the Scottish national team. For Northern Ireland, the situation is more taxing. As mentioned earlier, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland organise the union team at international sporting competitions, rugby being the most notable example. Instead of flying Ulster Banner or Irish Tricolour, the national team carries the Flag of the Irish Rugby Union which is more neutral than the other two official national flags. In terms of a national anthem, two different tunes were performed interchangeably until 1994. When a rugby match took place in Belfast which is the capital of Northern Ireland, “God Save Queen” was played before the game. When the Irish side performed in the Republic’s capital Dublin, “Soldier

Song” was sung during the opening ceremony. Given the history of British colonial domination, Irish nationalists disliked the fact that the British national anthem was played for the Irish rugby team. Equally, British loyalists in Northern Ireland did not want to sing the national anthem of the Republic because the song is mainly about glorifying independent fighters against Great Britain. Since the Irish Rugby Union introduced a more neutral song, “Ireland Call”, this tune is played when a rugby match is held within the territory of the island of Ireland. Whenever the national team visits foreign countries, however, “Soldier Song” is performed. As such, the use of national symbols in a sporting arena clearly demonstrates complicated but important national identity politics in the UK.

3. Sport and Scottish Independence

On 18 September 2014, a referendum on Scottish independence took place. While the outcome of the competitive election concludes that Scotland remains in the UK, the fact that a possible separation of Scotland from the more than 300 years of political union was officially debated is indicative of the significance of nationalist politics in the British Isles. It would be an exaggeration to claim that sport played a decisive role in this Scottish independent movement. Yet, the nationalist parties and politicians in Scotland appeared to be aware of the instrumental value of sport in their campaign for the separation from the United Kingdom (James, 2014). Regarding this, two international sporting events held in Scotland in 2014 are worth looking at. These are the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the Ryder Cup in Gleneagles.

Glasgow, which is the largest city in Scotland, hosted the Commonwealth Games from 23 July to 3 August 2014. While this sporting competition may not be recognised as a top-tier sports mega-event, this international multi-sport championship is sufficiently significant to re-imagine the national identity of Scotland within its territory and to show the Commonwealth countries a distinctive Scottish cultural identity (Jarvie, 2017). However, it is not merely flying St. Andrew’s flag and singing “Flower of Scotland” during the event that made the Glasgow Commonwealth Games a nationalistic ritual. More importantly, it is the timing when this sporting occasion was held that renders this competition politically meaningful. The fact that the Glasgow Commonwealth Games commenced about two months before the independence referendum implies the potential formation of political climate filled with a nationalistic sentiment in the host nation ahead of the election. In this circumstance, Scottish nationalists were able to appeal to people in Scotland to vote for independence more convincingly (James, 2014). While the Scottish First Minister who was leading Scottish

National Party proclaimed that he would not use the sporting event politically when the Commonwealth Games was opening, his pledge seems a rather defensive gesture, expecting that the mood of Scottish nationalism would intensify as the competition was unfolding (Johnson, 2014). Additionally, the fact that Scotland as being a relatively small nation was capable of delivering a large-scale international event gave the Scottish voters more confidence that they could manage major state affairs without support and assistance from the Parliament in Westminster in London (Jarvie, 2017).

The 2014 Ryder Cup also offered a useful opportunity to strengthen Scottish national identity before the referendum. In fact, this intercontinental golf competition took place after the national election had completed. Also, this sporting event was the contest between European and American golfers. Hence, the performance of golf at the tournament did not directly contribute to the formation of political circumstance in favour of the nationalists during the election period. Rather, it was a symbolic meaning of the sport and being a host of this premier golf championship that created a cultural space wherein Scottish identity was demonstrated and celebrated (The Economist, 2012). It should be borne in mind that Scotland is regarded as the home of golf and the ball game is the national sport of this Celtic nation. Thus, when the 2014 Ryder Cup was awarded to Gleneagles in Scotland in 2012, the then First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond keenly welcomed the decision, claiming golf coming home (BBC, 2012). In addition, in commemoration of hosting the intercontinental golf tournament, Scotland commissioned a special tartan, which is the traditional fabric of the nation (Daily Record, 2013). It should be noted that a cloth made of a tartan constitutes an important component of the cultural identity of Scotland (Zumkhawala-Cook, 2008). Therefore, by hosting the Ryder Cup, Scotland effectively showed off its unique national identity, utilising two distinctively Scottish cultural resources, namely the game of golf and a tartan.

In spite of this potentially favourable condition, Scottish nationalists failed to materialise their political ambition. Yet, during the election campaign, they observed the continually increasing popularity of their political cause. This means that by exploiting the mass support as a stepping-stone, the Scottish nationalists could strengthen their political leverage in Anglo-Scottish relations. In that sense, the nationalistic movement before the referendum was not completely meaningless. Given the capacity of sport to stimulate nationalistic emotion, the political effect that the 2014 Commonwealth Games and Ryder Cup had on the independence campaign must not be dismissed. Certainly, the two sporting

occasions facilitated the circulation of a nationalistic sentiment before the referendum, and the political value of sport within the independent movement can be discerned in this respect.

4. Sport and Brexit

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted for leaving the European Union. However, the margin between “to leave” (51.89%) and “to stay” (48.11%) was less than 4% point. Moreover, these were mainly rural areas and post-industrial towns in England and Wales that predominantly voted to leave the EU. By contrast, a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland wanted to stay in the European Union. Notably, in Scotland, the “remain” side won every election council. Understandably, Scotland initially refused to accept the result, claiming the Celtic nation would gain neither political nor economic interests by leaving the EU (Ings, 2017). Moreover, the Scottish government would make a diplomatic effort to keep its EU membership (Holmes, 2016). These different voting patterns between the home nations render the post-Brexit national identity politics in the UK more complicated. On the one hand, Brexit, especially for the residents of post-industrial towns in England, signifies ethnocentric British nationalism against multiculturalism and global capitalism that the EU committees advocate. On the other hand, for the Celtic fringe nations, leaving the EU implies losing significant business partners and weakening their pan-European cultural identities. The 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro was the first major international competition taken place since the EU referendum, and this global sports mega-event offers an interesting occasion through which the emergence of two major political forces caused by Brexit can be examined.

In relation to the post-Brexit British national identity politics, an advertising campaign for a supermarket chain ALDI, which is one of the official sponsors of the Team GB, deserves careful attention. In 2016, this company launched its Olympic communication campaign called “Home Grown Heroes”. This commercial discourse seems to reflect a sense of exclusive nationalism that Brexit represents. It should be noted that an anti-immigration sentiment accounted for the central component of the leaving the EU campaign (Hobolt, 2016). The EU law allows free movement of European citizens between EU member states, and the UK industry has been attracting a large number of Eastern European labourers (Outhwaite, 2017). As the population of foreign workers increases visibly in the UK, many British people, notably in England, feared that their homeland might be too much Europeanised (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). Additionally, the high unemployment rate that British youngsters had faced also intensified the anti-immigration feelings (Clarke,

Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). The ALDI's marketing campaign associated with the Olympics, as the name "Home Grown Heroes" suggests, involves an element of anti-immigrant sentiment. The actual TV commercial highlights the benefit of consuming "home-grown" products and the duty to support "home-grown" athletes for British nationals. Also, the TV advertisement contains a number of symbols that depict 'pure' Britishness, - such as nostalgic memories, domestic agricultural industry, and natural beauty of the nation. The combination of these components implies that the UK is a self-contained and self-sufficient nation whose fortune, including a sporting success at the Olympic Games must be determined by the will and effort of the "home-grown" British citizens. In this way, ALDI's Olympic commercial seems to reinforce the ethnocentric British nationalism.

Another interesting occasion that mirrors the post-Brexit national identity is "Heroes Parade". As mentioned earlier, the Team GB, which is a sporting union of the four home nations, takes part in the Olympic Games. In this respect, this sporting occasion can be a crucial moment to ameliorate the post-Brexit political clash and to rebuild a collective identity. At the 2016 Olympics, the British athletes achieved remarkable sporting success, winning 67 medals including 27 Olympic Golds. In celebration of this impressive record, the UK arranged a welcoming event called "Heroes Parade" in London and Manchester. This is mainly the parade of Olympic athletes into the two major cities in the UK. Interestingly, the Manchester event considered more important than that in London. Not only was the scale of the Manchester parade larger than the march in London, but BBC live broadcast the welcoming occasion being held in the North of England. By contrast, the media paid relatively scarce attention to the parade in London. It seems that "Heroes Parade" was the moment which highlighted the importance of having unified British national identity. Given that the outcome of Brexit has left deep political fissure, the UK needs a political opportunity to re-establish a sense of national community (Hobolt, 2016). The Olympic success provided a useful occasion for reinforcing social bonds that link British people together. Moreover, Manchester was the city where the results of different election councils were gathered and eventually the ultimate outcome, Brexit, was declared. In other words, the city is a symbolically important place insofar as the EU referendum is concerned. Thus, the celebration of the British national identity through "Heroes Parade" in Manchester evidently denotes a national attempt to make a disunited Kingdom the United Kingdom again.

5. What lies ahead?

Brexit has a number of political ramifications which make the future of the UK somewhat uncertain. As for nationalism in the UK and its relations with the EU, at least two notable issues deserve a careful consideration. First, Brexit rekindles the feeling of Scottish nationalism. As noted earlier, Scotland is the home nation who firmly expressed its desire to remain in the EU through the national election. Nevertheless, the overall outcome of the EU referendum turned out to be leaving the European Union which is completely against the will of Scotland. In response to this result, the nationalists are arguing for another independent vote in the coming years in order to safeguard the political and economic interest of Scotland (Harris, 2017). The incumbent First Minister of Scotland also strongly supports this view. Yet, the British Prime Minister rules out the possibility of holding another Scottish independence referendum before its Brexit negotiation with the EU is completed (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). This disagreement between the two political leaders deepens the Anglo-Scottish crack. In this respect, the performance and display of sport will be likely to mirror this conflict. For Scotland, sport has frequently provided a cultural stage on which its national identity, especially its antipathy towards England, is being projected (Bairner, 2001). My preliminary observation on the 2017 Six Nations Rugby Championship wherein the four home nations are invited to play shows a bold demonstration of fervent and emotive Scottish national identity in the stadium, especially when Scotland encountered England. This is indicative of an anti-English sentiment rapidly on the rise after Brexit.

Second, Brexit also has significant implications for the inter-Irish relations. It should be noted that Northern Ireland is the only home nation geographically bordered with a member state of the European Union, the Republic of Ireland. Because of a rather unfortunate history of Ireland which includes the British colonial domination and the partition of Ireland, Irish nationalism and republicanism which aim to re-establish a unified Ireland account for a major political discourse in Northern Ireland, though the presence of equally influential British unionists makes the development of a unified Ireland practically uneasy (Sugden & Bairne, 1993). None the less, the two Irish nations maintain a cooperative relationship, and there also exists a strong cultural tie between them. Especially, the UK constituency and the Republic continue a mutually interdependent economic partnership. Brexit unnecessarily set a political and economic barrier between the two sides. Hence, it is understandable the reason why Northern Ireland is reluctant to accept the outcome of the EU referendum. Due to Northern Ireland's willingness to stay in the EU, this home nation is now seriously contemplating the possibility of forming a unified Ireland in order keep its EU membership, though it is uncertain if this political plan is materialised in the near future (Rankin, 2017). In sport,

especially in rugby, the two Irish nations already display a sense of a unified Irishness by taking part in international rugby fixtures as one. Yet, it is unlikely that the union at international rugby will automatically pave a way to Irish unification. Despite this limitation, Irish national identity politics being highlighted through sport, particularly through rugby, is worth paying continuous attention to in the post-Brexit era.

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